

# **Common Schools and Uncommon Conversations: Education, Religious Speech and Public Spaces**

---

**KENNETH A. STRIKE**

*This paper discusses the role of religious speech in the public square and the common school. It argues for more openness to political theology than many liberals are willing to grant and for an educational strategy of engagement over one of avoidance. The paper argues that the exclusion of religious debate from the public square has dysfunctional consequences. It discusses Rawls's more recent views on public reason and claims that, while they are not altogether adequate, they are consistent with engagement. The outcome of these arguments is applied to three 'hot button' issues in US education: creationism, an issue of gay rights, and teaching the Bible in schools.*

As for the American experience, it is utterly exceptional: there is no other fully developed industrial society with a population so committed to its faiths (and such exotic ones), while being equally committed to the Great Separation. Our [American] political rhetoric, which owes much to the Protestant sectarians of the 17th century, vibrates with messianic energy, and it is only thanks to a strong constitutional structure and various lucky breaks that political theology has never seriously challenged the basic legitimacy of our institutions. Americans have potentially explosive religious differences over abortion, prayer in schools, censorship, euthanasia, biological research and countless other issues, yet they generally settle them within the bounds of the Constitution. It's a miracle. And miracles can't be willed (Lilla, 2007).

If miracles can't be willed can the virtues, practices and convictions that underlie them be taught? According to Professor Pring the task of common schools is to create community. This point needs to be made carefully. We must create community while respecting diversity. In societies characterised by durable pluralism, any common culture must be a common liberal democratic culture. This is what common schools should help create. The details of this project are complex and contentious and its execution difficult.

Presumably, the commitments and virtues we wish students to share are to be created partly through some form of engagement. At least this is the story Americans often tell one another. We promote equal recognition of and respect for members of different cultures by telling and hearing our stories. We do this via a curriculum that includes the history and literature of everyone (as much as feasible), and we explain ourselves to each other and argue with each other in order to better understand one another—even if the explaining and arguing is sometimes painful and contentious. Whether, how much or how well this actually happens is debatable, but it is a good story. The success of the project of the common schools requires engagement.

This is not the story we usually tell about religion. Professor Lilla suggests the core American story about religion is that of the Great Separation. We try to privatise religion and to keep religious voices out of the public square. It is doubtful that many Americans could give an account of Rawls's (1971) notion of public reason, but this idea is a technical formulation of the moral intuitions that underlie the Great Separation. When we deal with one another as citizens, we leave our faiths at home. Those who use God-talk in the public square need their mouths washed out with liberal soap. In schools we seem reluctant to seek even mutual understanding of our diverse religions. We avoid theology, let alone theological politics.

Educators are partly motivated to keep religion out of schools because religion is the (a?) third rail of American education. Touch it and you die. The strategy of the common schools concerning religion is more one of avoidance than engagement. We even tend to expunge religiously sensitive material from the curriculum (see Vitz, 1986). This is understandable. Sensible people avoid third rails. It is less obvious that it is a good thing.

So far as US education is concerned, it is also not clear that the Great Separation is the entire story. One factor that helped the privatisation of religion to succeed in the US was that the Great Separation was not carried out thoroughly. The American common schools were, at their inception, able to rise above religious sectarianism because they were founded on a consensual Protestantism in a largely Protestant nation (see Macedo, 2000). Moreover many religious people who were satisfied with the constitutionally required separation of church and state did not understand this to require religious voices to be silent about matters of public policy or education. Many thought that the lowest common denominator Protestantism that infused public schools was essential for public morality. And, as Lilla notes, political theology has long infused American politics. And God-talk has had its liberal/progressive moments. The abolitionist movement and the civil rights movement are paradigm cases. Indeed, the use of religious argument for liberal causes is well rooted in the liberal tradition. Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1946) is full of religious arguments.

Still God-talk in the public square makes liberals nervous. Those taken with Rawls's (1993) political liberalism are likely to argue that a

successful overlapping consensus requires us to keep our comprehensive doctrines at a respectful distance from political debate.

Hence two questions: Jeffrey Stout asks the first one well.

Among the expressive acts obviously protected by this right [freedom of religion] are rituals and other devotional practices performed in solitude, in the context of one's family, or in association with others similarly disposed. More controversial, however, is a class of acts that express religious commitments in another way; namely, by employing them as reasons when taking a public stand on political issues. What role, if any, should religious premises play in the reasoning citizens engage in when they make and defend political decisions? (Stout, 2004, p. 63)

The second question is this: In common schools what role does religious discourse have in the education of good liberal citizens? Is engagement or avoidance the better strategy? The answers I will give to these two questions are roughly these: First, we need to make more room for religious discourse in public space than many liberal theorists want. Second, with respect to religion, engagement is a better strategy for common schools than avoidance.

In the next section of this paper, I will argue that a civic culture that overly privatises religious speech has some undesirable consequences. In the section that follows, I will consider Rawls's recent views on public reason arguing that they are supportive of considerable openness to religious argument. Finally I will apply the results to three 'hot button' issues in American education. These are creationism and/or ID in public schools, gay rights (Day of Silence versus Day of Truth) and the question of whether and how we should teach the Bible in schools.

## **RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

Many liberals suggest that religious premises should have little or no role in political argument. Amy Gutmann (1987) claims that secular standards are a fairer and firmer basis for settling our differences than are religious standards. Bruce Ackermann (1980) claims that liberal neutrality requires that we avoid arguments that require us to claim that our conception of the good is to be preferred to that of others. Most famously, John Rawls (1971) has developed a view of public reason that seems to prefer secular standards to religious ones. Each thinker makes the claim that liberal citizens should give other citizens arguments appealing to premises that they can share and, since religious arguments cannot be shared in a religiously pluralistic society, they are inappropriate in the public square.

Nevertheless, one hears much about religion in political discourse. Americans are a religious people and expect some measure of piety from their leaders. Still, asserting that one's religious convictions should be normative for others in our civic life is usually frowned upon. Americans are not, as a rule, theocrats. Thus, paradoxically, American politicians now

seem required to testify to their piety while also promising not to act on their distinctive religious convictions. Much religiously charged political discourse occurs on the edge of the public square. In addition to its many places of worship, America is chocked full of religious periodicals, broadcasts and web sites that assert political views. There are numerous religious schools where students hear political theology. Places of worship themselves have become sites of political activism. These forums largely preach to the choir, and religious forums are highly fragmented on ideological lines. While this fragmentation has become more prevalent even in mass-market media, it seems extreme in the religious world.

Much theological politics in the US thus has two important characteristics. First, insofar as *argument* about politics actually occurs, it occurs in forums populated by the likeminded. When theological politics erupts into broader public forums, it is likely to be expressed more as conclusions and demands than as argument. Second, a common response to theological politics is that it is illegitimate because it is religiously inspired. What those who engage in theological politics often hear is not rebuttal of their arguments, but an accusation of bad faith. In this way broad based media give voice to the Great Separation.

This state of affairs has several undesirable consequences. First, because religious arguments for policy positions are made largely before audiences of the likeminded, they are unlikely to be effectively tested or rebutted. Often, people of faith do not even hear, let alone understand, the voices of other people of faith who draw different conclusions than they. Arguably, as Mill (1859/1956) predicted in *On Liberty*, the fact that people of faith do not need to defend their views has resulted in a diminished understanding of them by their own adherents. Second, this state of affairs easily gives rise to the view that the debate is between people of faith and secularists—people of no faith, and the Great Separation is easily seen as a contrivance of exclusion of the faithful by the faithless. ‘Secular’ comes to mean ‘anti- religious’. ‘Liberal secularist’ is a redundancy. Third, this two-valued choice between liberal secularists and people of faith tends to identify religious views with conservative and illiberal views. Christian fundamentalists often claim to speak for Christians generally. When this view is granted by their secular opponents, liberal/progressive religious views are discounted and ignored. Fourth, the delegitimisation of religion in the public square provides an incentive to disingenuousness among religious people. People of faith may invent secular arguments to get a hearing. Fifth, this state of affairs encourages misunderstanding and promotes vilification. When conclusions are visible and the reasons for them are not, people are less able to see an issue through the eyes of their opponents. People on the one side will see their opponents as ungodly. People on the other side will see their opponents as ignorant and unreasonable. The mutual respect required of good citizens is not encouraged. Sixth, what people of faith will hear when they are told that religious reasons do not belong in the public square is that the reasons they have are inappropriate even if they are true. Only the truth of secularists counts. This is likely to be experienced as exclusion and

dominance and lead to disaffection with the political order. Finally, when public discourse is dominated by conclusions and exclusions rather than by open debate it is likely to degenerate into slogans and posturing—into a war of bumper stickers, slogans and T-shirts.

These points suggest that a political culture in which people are not encouraged to express all the reasons they have for their conclusions and to do so where people who do not share their convictions will hear them and can respond to them will be unhealthy and miseducative. The points are not uniquely about theological politics. They characterise the dismal state of deliberative politics in the US generally. Yet religion is different because the privatisation strategy of the Great Separation suggests that a liberal political culture depends on people keeping their theologies out of the public square.

### RAWLS ON PUBLIC REASON

Are the reasons for keeping religious arguments out of the public square convincing? To address this question I want to look at Rawls's (1999) most recent views on public reason. In fact, Rawls's considered views on public reason do not conform to the restrictive picture that claims that religion has no role in public space. In order to develop the relevant features of his most recent account I want to attend to two core ideas.

The first is the distinction between the public political forum and the background culture. The public political forum has three parts: judges in their opinions, public officials and candidates for public office. The background culture is the discourse of civil society. About the latter Rawls says,

The idea of public reason does not apply to the background culture with its many forms of non-public reason nor to media of any kind. Sometimes those who appear to reject the idea of public reason actually mean to assert the need for full and open discussion in the background culture. With this political liberalism fully agrees (p. 134).

Rawls goes on to distinguish the *idea* of public reason from the *ideal* of public reason:

... we say that ideally citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact ... Thus citizens fulfill their duty of civility and support the idea of public reason by doing what they can to hold government officials to it (p. 135).

Presumably they should also hold themselves to it when debating matters that are or might be before the legislature if they are to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity and their duty of civility. Arguably, then, the *ideal* of public

reason applies to the background culture. Rawls concludes with what he calls the wide view of public reason:

Thus, the content of public reason is given by the principles and values of the family of liberal conceptions of justice . . . To engage in public reason is to appeal to one of these political conceptions—to their ideals and principles, standards and values—when debating fundamental political questions. This requirement still allows us to introduce into political discussions at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or non-religious, provided that in due course we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support. I refer to this requirement as the *proviso* . . . (pp. 143–4).

These ideas provide a view of public dialogue that is quite open to religious speech. Here is how I understand them:

1. The *idea* of public reason applies directly to public officials in the conduct of their office. However, the *ideal* of public reason applies to all citizens in their role as ideal legislators and wherever political ideas are discussed.
2. The idea and the ideal of public reason serve the legitimacy of democratic decision making by ensuring that among the reasons that justify any given exercise of governmental authority are those that can be accepted by all because they are rooted in a conception of justice that is in the family of liberal conceptions.
3. The idea of public reason proposes no restrictions on the kinds of speech appropriate to the background culture.
4. The ideal of public reason imposes only a duty of civility.
5. The ideal of public reason permits people to express religious reasons for public policy so long as they eventually redeem their arguments with public reasons.

The wide view of public reason can be extended to support what I call *engagement*. Rawls discusses two forms of non-public reasoning that consider background comprehensive doctrines. The first he calls *declaration*. Here the idea is that various parties declare their own comprehensive doctrines with no expectation that others will agree. They then proceed to show how, from the perspective of their own doctrine, they can endorse a reasonable public conception of justice. The second strategy is *conjecture*. Here one takes the perspective of the comprehensive doctrine of others and argues from it in an attempt to demonstrate that the perspective allows its adherents to endorse a reasonable public conception of justice.

These strategies emphasise the implications of comprehensive doctrines, leaving the doctrines themselves untouched. A key assumption of both conjecture and declaration is that the comprehensive doctrines at issue are able to provide a basis for entering into a reasonable public conception of justice if they are interpreted properly. They do not however, put comprehensive doctrines themselves on the table for

rebuttal; hence they do not provide people who hold illiberal comprehensive doctrines with reasons to change their minds. Nor will they provide a way of entering into debate concerning the policy implications of illiberal comprehensive doctrines.

What is needed is an augmentative strategy that more fully considers the content of illiberal religious convictions. I will call this strategy *engagement*. Engagement involves two key ideas. First, in public debate, people are asked to provide all of the reasons (religious or not and illiberal or not) they have for their political views and to make these views as available to others as they are able. Second, these reasons are to be open to critique on their substance. Theological claims may be made and rebutted.

Rawls's wide view of public reason does not forbid engagement. At most the religious arguments involved in engagement need only be redeemed by public reasons. In fact the wide view forbids no speech, and, given that there will be few policies for which some public reason cannot be found, the proviso is easily satisfied. The wide view seems almost vacuous. Nevertheless I have reservations about it. It inhibits engagement even if it does not forbid it. First, the requirement that religious speech needs to be redeemed by the giving of public reasons still carries the implication that religious reasons for public policies are inadequate. This stigmatises religious reasons and tends to exclude those for whom they provide primary reasons for their political views. Arguably, the wide view of public reason manages the unique feat of stigmatising people of faith by means of a view that requires little of them. Second, the wide view suggests that while religious reasons may be given for public policies, it is less clear that or how they count as justifications. Suppose we are faced with a choice between policies A and B and that public reasons have been advanced for both. Suppose also that the preponderance of public reasons supports A. However, there are significant religious grounds supporting B. May we legitimately choose B because the proviso has been met? If we say 'Yes', then religious reasoning can tip the balance. This undercuts the point of the wide view. If we say 'No' then we have taken the view that while religious reasons may be given, they count for little or nothing. We have reduced religious reasoning to the provision of moral support for decisions that must be reached on non-religious grounds. God is made a cheerleader. Finally, even the wide view of public reason places those who have religious views for public policies in a difficult position. As a matter of conscience they may not be able to and should not be expected to disavow their religious reasons. If they are to take public reasons seriously as well they are, at best, committed to a kind of moral bilingualism where they must translate their religious reasons into secular terms. Is there anything that guarantees the possibility of such a translation? If there is not, moral bilingualism can lead to moral schizophrenia. Can we assume a kind of pre-established harmony between people's religious frameworks and public reason? The only thing that is likely to ensure coherence is the possession of liberal religious convictions. For those who do not have them, this requires not only declaration and conjecture, but engagement.

We should recall that when Rawls characterises what does count as a public reason, he notes that there is a family of liberal views and claims that ‘to engage in public reason is to appeal to one of these political conceptions—to their ideals and principles, standards and values—when debating fundamental political questions’ (pp. 143–4). Among the family of liberal views are those that are religiously rooted. To what extent do we wish the voices of those who hold liberal views for religious reasons muted? Should the liberal response to Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, to the arguments of the Abolitionist movement or to Locke in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* be to suggest that such speech must be redeemed by public argument? Liberalism and religion are entangled in complex ways. Many of the principles of a liberal polity have their analogues and some of their roots in religious conceptions. Before Kant deemed human beings objects of respect, the Old Testament claimed that they were created in the image of God. Justice and concern for the poor is a constant theme in Biblical literature. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a multicultural story. Freedom of conscience is a Protestant doctrine as well as a liberal one. Sometimes those of illiberal religious persuasions might be redeemed from them by a more careful reading of their Bibles. People may coherently find a liberal conception of justice to be a consequence of their faith. God is thought by them to favour freedom and equality. If so, why should liberals disavow His support?

What these arguments and examples suggest is that what liberals need to resist is not religious arguments for public policies; it is illiberal religious arguments. (They also suggest that any overlapping consensus should emphasise commitment to constitutional and democratic practices more than a shared political doctrine; see Stout, 2005.) The form that this resistance should take is rebuttal, not exclusion. This rebuttal may take as many forms as there are diverse reasons for resisting illiberal conceptions. However, theological rebuttal should be valued. Many illiberal views can be claimed to be bad theology as well as illiberal politics.

We should be mindful that much of what now passes for theological politics needs rebuttal (see Hedges, 2006). Protestant fundamentalists are busily engaged in such endeavours as rewriting American history into a theocratic narrative; inventing a picture of the end times that distorts American foreign policy and discounts the need for environmental protection; reinventing biology to support creationism; and inventing medical and psychological facts to support abstinence programs in sex education. Most of this activity goes on under the radar, but it influences millions of people and, indeed, millions of children through fundamentalist schools and home schooling. The ideas generated in these forums often do not emerge into public space as ideas to be discussed and debated. They emerge as certitudes to be pursued by divine mandate. But they are eminently rebuttable and not just on secular grounds. It is important that illiberal religious convictions be rebutted by other people of faith employing theological conceptions and in forums where those who hold such illiberal views will hear the arguments.



## ENGAGEMENT IN THE COMMON SCHOOLS

How might we encourage engagement in common schools? Common schools have goals that must be respected in promoting engagement. They must create good citizens. They must teach academic subjects and the arts with integrity (see Strike, 2005). To accomplish these goals, common schools must grant provisional authority to core ideas of the disciplines and to the norms of liberal democratic societies. Common schools are not so many speakers' corners—places where anyone with a soapbox may be heard. When common schools seek to generate dialogue they are both moderator and teacher. As moderator schools must promote respectful and open democratic dialogue. As teacher they are a place where judgments about what is true or reasonable have to be made and where some ideas carry provisional authority.

A number of things follow. Here is a short list:

1. Common schools must be open to religious dialogue in a way that does not endorse anyone's religion. They may not compel either belief or practice.
2. Common schools should recognise the authority of academic communities to determine which ideas have provisional authority.
3. Common schools must respect and endorse core norms of liberal democratic societies.
4. Common schools may not permit the denigration of their members.
5. Common schools must insist on respectful debate.
6. Common schools must cultivate moral seriousness and reasonableness.

One more caveat: Appeals to intellectual openness can be used to legitimate claims that are untenable or outrageous. Schools are often asked to let students hear the evidence on both sides and decide for themselves. Schools must make judgments about what ideas are worth debating. They need not provide a forum for or lend legitimacy to every idea simply because someone believes it. Consider now three disputes.

### *Creationism*

In the US some religious groups have wanted to secure some form of recognition for a family of views that have been alternatively called scientific creationism and intelligent design (I will refer to all such views as creationism). They have sought recognition through statutes that mandate that creation science be taught whenever evolution is taught (*Edwards v. Aguillard*, 1987) or that require that intelligent design be represented as a viable alternative to evolution (*Kitzmiller, et al. v. Dover Area School District, et al.*, 2005). The following statement (partially quoted), which the Dover, PA, school board required to be read to students whenever evolution is taught, will illustrate:

Because Darwin's Theory is a theory, it is still being tested as new evidence is discovered. The Theory is not a fact. Gaps in the Theory exist for which there is no evidence. A theory is defined as a well-tested explanation that unifies a broad range of observations.

Intelligent design is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view. The reference book, *Of Pandas and People*, is available for students to see if they would like to explore this view in an effort to gain an understanding of what intelligent design actually involves.

As is true with any theory, students are encouraged to keep an open mind. The school leaves the discussion of the origins of life to individual students and their families.

Note five crucial elements about these efforts. First, they claim that evolution is not established fact. Second, they claim that there is creditable scientific evidence against evolution and in favour of creationism. Third, they claim that the first two points warrant some form of curricular inclusion. Fourth, they present a 'two-valued' choice. That is they suggest that the choice to be made is between evolution and creationism. Moreover, creationists commonly see evolution as the secular choice (intimately associated with atheism) and creationism as the religious choice. Finally, they make an appeal to the academic freedom of students. Schools should let students hear both sides of the case and make up their own minds.

### *Gay Rights*

The second dispute concerns gay rights. In some US schools gay rights activists have conducted what they term a Day of Silence. The *Day of Silence* (2007) web site gives the following description: 'The Day of Silence is an annual event held to commemorate and protest anti-LGBT bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools. Students and teachers nationwide will observe the day in silence to echo the silence that LGBT and ally students face everyday.' The Day of Silence asks those who wish to participate to be silent for a full day in their school. If they are asked about why they are silent, they are asked to pass out a card that reads:

Please understand my reasons for not speaking today. I am participating in the Day of Silence, a national youth movement protesting the silence faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies in schools. My deliberate silence echoes that silence, which is caused by harassment, prejudice, and discrimination. I believe that ending the silence is the first step toward fighting these injustices. Think about the voices you are not hearing today. What are you going to do to end the silence?

The Day of Silence has been countered by a religious group that has sponsored an event called the Day of Truth. According to the *Day of Truth* (2007) web site students wear a T-shirt that says: 'I am speaking the Truth to break the silence. Silence isn't freedom. It's a constraint. Truth tolerates

open discussion, because the Truth emerges when healthy discourse is allowed. By proclaiming the Truth in love, hurts will be halted, hearts will be healed, and lives will be saved.' The point appears to be to engage other students in conversation where the key message to be presented is 'Homosexuals can change.'

Note the oddity. While the web site claims to want to challenge the 'homosexual agenda' with a Christian message, the T-shirt worn by the Day of Truth participants does not directly address the message of the Day of Silence. Why?

I would conjecture the reason concerns a prior venture into T-shirt advocacy. The Day of Truth web site notes that,

In the past, students who have attempted to speak against the promotion of the homosexual agenda have been censored or, in some cases, punished for their beliefs. It is important that students stand up for their First Amendment right to hear and speak the Truth about human sexuality in order to protect that freedom for future generations.

This is an apparent reference to a case, *Harper v Poway Unified School District* (2005) concerning a T-shirt message worn to school by a teenager named Tyler Harper in response to a Day of Silence event. Harper's T-shirt read on one side I WILL NOT ACCEPT WHAT GOD HAS CONDEMNED and on the other HOMOSEXUALITY IS SHAMEFUL 'Romans 1:27' This T-shirt was viewed as inflammatory by school personnel, and Harper was made to spend the day in a conference room.

This case wound up in the US Court of Appeals, 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit. The Court upheld the school's contention that the T-shirt was inflammatory and that the school was within its rights to isolate Harper while he was wearing the T-shirt. The Court said:

We conclude that Harper's wearing of his T-shirt 'colli[des] with the rights of other students' in the most fundamental way. *Tinker*, 393 US at 508. Public school students who may be injured by verbal assaults on the basis of a core identifying characteristic such as race, religion, or sexual orientation, have a right to be free from such attacks while on school campuses.

The messages on the T-shirts worn by student participating in the Day of Truth were intended to draw other students into conversation about the matter so that the students could present their views on homosexuality while transforming the matter into a free speech issue and avoiding possible sanction for wearing a T-shirt with an inflammatory message.

Three things should be noted. First, the Day of Truth misrepresents what the Day of Silence advocates claim to be doing. The Day of Silence advocates do not claim to be advancing a broad 'homosexual agenda'. They claim to be making a case against bullying LGBT students (one

wonders if the Day of Truth people approve of bullying). Second, we see the same two-valued choice that we see in the creationism argument. The Day of Truth advocates represent themselves as the Christian option in contract to the secular option. Third, the promoters of the Day of Truth appeal to norms of intellectual openness. If the matter is controversial, the solution is to allow students to hear both sides and make up their own minds.

### *Teaching the Bible*

The third issue concerns the question as to whether the Bible should be taught in public schools in the US. In *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) the US Supreme Court banned prayer and Bible reading as an impermissible establishment of religion. *Schempp*, however, also held that:

It might be well said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilisation. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

Recently several groups have attempted to persuade schools to introduce courses about the Bible claiming that such courses are secular in character under *Schempp*. For some of these groups the view that students should study the Bible because it is a part of their heritage seems genuine and the intent to do so in a neutral and secular fashion sincere. Other groups radiate religious intent. *The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools* (2007) web site describes their effort in this way:

The curriculum for the program shows a concern to convey the content of the Bible as compared to literature and history. The program is concerned with education rather than indoctrination of students. The central approach of the class is simply to study the Bible as a foundation document of society, and that approach is altogether appropriate in a comprehensive program of secular education.

While the web site claims that its program is secular in character, it also raises some doubt about this. It claims, 'The world is watching to see if we will be motivated to impact our culture, to deal with the moral crises in our society, and reclaim our families and children' (see also Chancey, 2006).

The preferred view of the NCBC about how the Bible is to be taught is to emphasise reading the Bible itself. Here is part of a justification:

Not only is the use of the Bible as a primary textbook a good way to approach a class on the Bible, I would suggest it is the best way. Any

Bible curriculum that does not allow students to read it for themselves and draw their own conclusions insults the intelligence of the students and short changes them from getting a well-rounded education.

One might conjecture that there are other reasons for wishing use the Bible as the sole text for courses about the Bible. Protestant Fundamentalists are often persuaded of the idea that the Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible. Moreover, emphasising the content of Bible excludes critical views about the Bible from serious discussion. Here too we see both the 'Let students decide for themselves' ploy and the structuring of the issues as a two-valued choice between the Christian view and the liberal secular view. Elsewhere on the web page we find the comment that 'Of course, liberal groups are fighting at great expense to keep the Bible from being taught in public classrooms.'

Consider how well these issues illustrate my earlier characterisation of the state of public discussion about religion. First, the arguments tend to be formed in sectarian enclaves. They appear in public space as scripted pronouncements, slogans on warring T-shirts or on web sites aimed at the faithful. People do not envision meeting their opponents in a forum where each party considers the arguments of others. Arguments seem intended to elicit support from the already persuaded and to secure legitimacy for a particular view. Second, the debates are frequently represented as between people of faith and secular liberals. In these debates there is the secular liberal view and the Christian conservative view. Issues are represented as two-valued rather than multi-valued. There is a tendency on both sides of these two-valued debates to fail to recognise progressive religious views. Third, appeals to intellectual openness are common. If some people accept evolution and others creationism, let's present the evidence and let the students decide. Let children read the Bible and decide for themselves. If gays can advocate for 'the homosexual agenda', then Christians can advocate for 'the Christian view'. However, those who make this appeal often do not seem interested in a process where arguments are laid out in detail and opportunity for rebuttal is provided. Recognition, legitimacy and a chance to assert one's case are what is wanted. Fourth, the arguments presented in public space often vilify opponents. People from the Christian right tend to characterise their opponents as liberal secular atheists. Liberals in contrast rarely concede the sincerity of their opponents' religious convictions and are given to intimating that they are ignorant red-necked bigots. It is doubtful that either side could provide a full and accurate account of the views of their opponents.

In short, these matters enter into public space as well as into schools in ways that inhibit dialogue and undermine engagement. How might we promote engagement? It is hard to make many concrete suggestions because contexts are so varied. Often the strategy must be to look for the teachable moment or to create the teachable moment. The Day of Silence and Day of Truth issues invite teachers to take time to discuss the matter in their classes. In cases such as creationism, outside speakers might be invited to speak in a class and to represent their views. If the Bible is to be

taught, it must be taught in a way that is educationally appropriate and genuinely non-sectarian.

I will now turn to some rules for engagement, which I will illustrate with the three issues I have discussed. To promote reasoned engagement in schools:

1. *Schools must be clear about what they may, should and may not endorse.* Schools may not endorse any religious or anti-religious view. They may endorse the well-established results of scholarship. If these results are inconsistent with some religious view, that is not to count as endorsing an anti-religious view. At the same time no argument may be excluded simply because its premises are religious.

Schools may endorse evolution, but not creationism. They may endorse evolution because evolution is the established theory in the natural and biological sciences. Creationism is not. Thus, while schools may create forums in which the arguments of creationists can be heard and invite creationists to present them, they cannot do so in a way that endorses a message that creationism is a co-equal theory with evolution. To do so is to lie to one's students.

Similarly, if issues about homosexuality are to be discussed, schools may and should endorse a view of equal rights for gays. They may not endorse the view that homosexuality is sinful, but they may permit the view to be expressed and rebutted.

If the Bible is to be taught, relevant scholarship about the Bible must be considered. This includes issues about the origins of the canon and higher critical analyses of the text. Since these views are controversial among competent scholars, they should be considered but not endorsed. The divine authority of religious texts or their infallibility may also be considered but not endorsed.

2. *Discussion must model the norms of respectful civic engagement.* People should be encouraged to present all of the reasons they have for their views and to submit these views to rebuttal. The emphasis must be on the careful weighing of evidence, not on the opportunity to assert one's claims and clichés. Moral seriousness and conscientiousness in debate must be encouraged as must respect and civility. Students need to understand that they are free to draw such conclusions as they wish from any discussion, but they must also be encouraged to achieve an accurate understanding of and respect for the views of those with whom they disagree. These norms need to be object of deliberate instruction, and students should come to see them and the reciprocity they presuppose as what is expected of good citizens.
3. *Debates should not be structured so as to imply that they are two-valued—between secular liberals and religious conservatives.* Often this means that the voices of religious progressives need to be heard. For example, if a creationist is to be invited to present the arguments of creationists, then someone who is a person of faith who accepts evolution should also be invited. Similarly, if issues about

homosexuality are to be discussed, an adequate diversity of religious views on the matter must be represented. And if the Bible or some other religious text is to be taught, different views concerning the canon, the origins, and the interpretation of sacred texts should be presented and discussed.

4. *While schools may endorse views either because they are the established results of scholarly inquiry or are expressions of liberal democratic norms, they may not prevent alternative views from being heard.* Schools may endorse evolution, but may not require students to believe it. Tests must test for knowledge and understanding, not agreement. Schools may endorse equal rights for homosexuals, but may not sanction students for holding that homosexuality is a sin.
5. *Intellectual openness does not require schools to provide a forum for the consideration of views that are heinous or devoid of rational support. Nor do they require schools to provide a forum to those unable to respect the norms of civil debate.*

Engagement is not easy. Many liberals will believe that I have given too much room for religious advocacy and have provided a voice to those whose views are irrational, unreasonable and perhaps contemptible. To them I can only say that democratic conversations that seek common ground cannot begin by excluding a whole genre of widely held views from serious discussion. Moreover, the attempt to exclude has tended to cause the expression of such views to go underground where they gain strength, go un rebutted and emerge in aggressive and theocratic forms. It is both more principled and strategically wiser to invite advocates of such views to the conversational table.

Some people of conservative faith will think I have rigged the rules against them. In some cases, they will be invited to make their case in a forum that has endorsed views that they seek to rebut. The rules of engagement will not seem to them to provide a neutral forum for debate. Indeed, they might reasonably think that what I want is to invite them to a dialogical thumping. Here it needs to be noted that the rules provide an open opportunity to present one's case and permit those students who are persuaded to believe as they wish. Schools cannot provide a neutral forum if that requires them to provide equal endorsement of views that have not gained respect in the approximate scholarly community. Schools may not lie to their students. Nor can they cannot abandon the task of creating citizens for democratic societies.

Were I a school principal or a teacher I would be reluctant to take my advice. I have issued an invitation to touch a well charged third rail. I can only sympathise and recommend a suitable mix of courage and caution. Democratic societies need engagement. The Great Separation should not mean that people of faith are made second-class citizens or that religion cannot be discussed in public space or common schools. To do so is to invite religious views to go underground and to invite a dysfunctional struggle between some people of faith and liberalism. Conservatives sometime claim that freedom of religion should not mean freedom from

religion. They are wrong about this. Freedom of religion does entail the right not to believe. However, freedom of religion should not mean freedom from religious discourse. Engagement is a better way for the common schools of liberal democratic societies than the avoidance we now practice.

*Correspondence:* Kenneth A. Strike, P.O. Box 174, Thendara, NY 13472, USA.

E-mail: kstrike@frontiernet.net.

## REFERENCES

- Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) 374 US 203 Available online at: [http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0374\\_0203\\_ZO.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0374_0203_ZO.html) (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Ackerman, B. (1980) *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press).
- Chancey, M. (2006) Textbook Case: Bible Class in Public School, *Christian Century*, November 14, pp. 12–13.
- Day of Silence* (2007) Available online at <http://www.dayofsilence.org/index.html> (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Day of Truth* (2007) Available online at <http://www.dayoftruth.org/about/default.aspx> (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987) 482 US 578.
- Gutmann, A. (1987) *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).
- Harper v. Poway Unified School District* (9<sup>th</sup> Cir., 2006) Available online at: [http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/ca9/newopinions.nsf/D2D4CBF690CD61A6882571560001FEBD/\\$file/0457037.pdf?openelement](http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/ca9/newopinions.nsf/D2D4CBF690CD61A6882571560001FEBD/$file/0457037.pdf?openelement) (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Hedges, C. (2006) *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York, Free Press).
- Kitzmiller, et al. v. Dover Area School District, et al.*, (2005) Available online at: [http://www.pamd.uscourts.gov/kitzmiller/kitzmiller\\_342.pdf](http://www.pamd.uscourts.gov/kitzmiller/kitzmiller_342.pdf) (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Lilla, M. (2007) The Politics of God, *New York Times Magazine*, August 19, Available online at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE3DA163DF93AA2575BC0A9619C8B63> (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Locke, J. (1946) *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Oxford, UK, Basil Blackwell).
- Macedo, S. (2000) *Diversity and Distrust* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Mill, J. S. (1859/1956) *On Liberty* (New York, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc).
- National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (2007) Available online at: <http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Site/index2.htm> (accessed 19 October 2007).
- Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Rawls, J. (1993) *Political Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Press).
- Rawls, J. (1999) The Idea of Public Reasons Revisited, in: J. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Stout, J. (2004) *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).
- Strike, K. A. (2005) Is Liberal Education Illiberal? Political Liberalism and Liberal Education, in: C. Higgins (ed.) *Philosophy of Education, 2004* (Urbana, IL, Philosophy of Education Society).
- Vitz, P. (1986) *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, MI, Servant Books).